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SOCIALISM AND THE AMERICAN FARMER

BY CHARLES JOHNSTON

THE Socialist platform of 1912, on which Mr. Eugene V. Debs stands as Presidential candidate, has very much to say of the American workingman, but little, wonderfully little, of the American farmer. Indeed, what comes closest to the farmer's heart and life in the platform is modestly squeezed into seven words; and I am constrained to believe that the would-be President Debs and Governor Russell and their associates devoutly pray that these seven words may pass unnoticed, or, at least, uncomprehended, by the American farmer, whom they most concern.

That the platform should speak chiefly of the workingman, that is, the factory-hand and the miner, is very intelligible; for this is the class from which the Socialist party draws its chief strength. A large proportion of this class, whether in the factory towns of New England or the coal-fields of Pennsylvania, is foreign-born, with almost no knowledge of English, with practically no understanding of this country, or of the real conditions of its life. Great numbers of these people have escaped from circumstances of extreme hardship and privation in the towns and villages of Central Europe or the border provinces of Russia, the country of the Pale. They have come with glittering hopes of a new promised land, believing that they will literally pick up gold in the streets of America.

They have brought with them also, to inflame their inevitable disappointment, the gospels of their people at home, the gospel of Karl Marx and Ferdinand Lasalle, Krapotkin and Bakunin, the revolutionary Socialism of Germany and Russia, with its spirit of hatred, of discord, of materialism, with its underlying motto: "the triumph of creation is destruction."

These people had very real grievances at home in Europe,

the home which so many left with joy and gladness. They have very real sufferings and privations in America, to which they looked as a New Jerusalem, where trees should bear all manner of fruit every month of the year. One cannot but sympathize deeply and sincerely with them. One cannot but regret that they have sought to help themselves by such a hopeless road as Socialism. Socialism in this country has thus its strongest foothold among the new arrivals, in the East Sides and North Ends of the great cities, in the mines and factory towns. And it has its real driving power in their very natural and very righteous desire for higher wages, easier conditions of work, better and more comfortable homes.

But what is the position of the American farmer?

The Census of 1910, which reckons the population of the United States as, in round numbers, ninety-two millions, tells us that the urban population makes up some forty-two millions of these, while the rural population numbers about fifty millions: the backbone of the nation, as well as a majority of its people.

Excluding the snow-fields of Alaska, the acreage of this country is something under a billion and a half acres. Much of this is mountain-peak or desert, useless for agriculture. The area actually included in farms, according to the census of 1910, is 878,798,325 acres, as against 839,591,774 acres in 1900. This farm land is divided into over six million farms. The exact number is 6,361,502, as against 5,737,372 farms in 1900. And the average size of these six and a third million farms is 138 acres, as against 146 acres in 1900. The lesser figures mean that large plantations in the South and big ranches in the West, to which, in certain States, Indian lands are to be added, have been cut up into small lots and sold to American farmers.

For the great majority of these six and a third million farms are worked by their owners; the number of farms owned by landlords and worked by tenants, in the English fashion, is so small as to be practically negligible. Therefore, of the six and a third million farms, some five million farms are owned entirely or in part by their occupiers; and this enormous class of farmer-proprietors, the largest single class in the nation, forms the backbone of the American people: the backbone of the electorate, too, if it comes to that.

Each of these five million farms, thus owned by the farmer himself, is supplied with dwellings, farm-buildings, stock,

agricultural implements, and so forth, averaging some two thousand dollars in value, in addition to the value of the land. It may fairly be assumed that each farmer's family averages six persons, not including hired help in this; so that we may count the land-owning class in this country as numbering thirty millions or over, a majority of the fifty millions which the census sets down as our rural population. These farmer-proprietors are capitalists, to an extent which we shall in a moment consider. They are also laborers, and, it should be added in parenthesis, their children form a very large part of the child-labor of our statistics. As far as these capitalist-laborers are concerned, therefore, it is perfectly evident that the supposed opposition between capital and labor, of which the Socialist platform makes so much, is mere nonsense. As well talk of them being divided by "class-consciousness" and "class-war."

The census figures show that, while the number of farms and their total acreage has increased, the average size has slightly decreased. But the amount of improved land has increased proportionately; for, while the average acreage of improved land on each farm was, in 1900, seventy-two acres, that average had risen, in 1910, to seventy-five acres. This gives us, as the type and foundation of American life, the hundred-and-forty-acre farm, with its buildings and stock, its seventy-five acres of improved land, its independent farmer-proprietor, who is one of some five or six million farmers, raising families in like independence, industry, and thrift, and, quite apart from that thrift, in steadily growing wealth.

We have seen that this vast class of farmer-proprietors are at once capitalists and laborers. In 1900 the capital value of their farms was over twenty billion dollars, the exact figures being \$20,439,901,164. This is an increase in capital value of four billions since 1890, and of eight billions since 1880. Now consider the figures for 1910. The capital value of American farms in 1910 is stated by the census as forty billion dollars, or, to be exact, as \$40,991,449,090, an increase of twenty billion dollars in ten years—an increase of more than one hundred per cent. The value of American farms has doubled in ten years, and this enormous increase is not due chiefly to the efforts of the farmers; it does not represent the result of better tillage, wholly or even largely. It is due to the general development of the

country, to the increase in general wealth, and to the greater demand for land, which is in itself an expression of the greater general wealth.

The average value of these six or more million farms has risen from \$3,563 in 1900 to \$6,444 in 1910. The value of the farms per acre has risen from \$24 to \$46; the value of the land alone has risen from \$15 an acre to \$32 an acre, an increase of 108 per cent. And this in the space of ten years. This, I think, is by far the most striking single fact revealed by the recent census, a fact the importance and bearing of which we are far from fully realizing. So that, so far from productive land falling into the clutches of a small and ever-increasing minority, an imaginary ruling class of landlords, American farms in the hands of their owners are steadily increasing in numbers, being now about five millions in number; they are of sufficient size to support a thrifty family in ease and plenty, averaging some hundred and forty acres each; and they are increasing with astonishing rapidity in value, having doubled in total value, land, stock, implements, and buildings; and something more than doubled, as to the value of the land alone, in the course of the last ten years.

So that the framers of the Socialist platform have no just cause to be uneasy about the American farmers. These form the most numerous class in the nation, the wealthiest farming class in the world, holding property whose capital value is some forty-one billion dollars.

On the other hand, have the American farmers just cause to be uneasy about the framers of the Socialistic platform? A doctor who is very self-confident and eager to prescribe, with little or no knowledge of the facts of the case, is a quack; if allowed to administer the prescription and treatment based on his faulty diagnosis and imperfect knowledge, he is a dangerous quack. And I think I have said enough to show that, so far as the largest productive class in America is concerned, the framers of the Socialist platform are both ignorant and dangerous.

Their blundering diagnosis of the most important facts in the productive life of the country I have already made, I think, sufficiently clear. I have not yet quoted the proposed remedy. That remedy is contained in the seven words, of which I have already spoken, with the suggestion that their framers must devoutly pray that the American farmer will not read them, or, reading, will not mark, learn, and in-

wardly digest them: the words: "the collective ownership of land, wherever practicable."

I do not believe that a single man on the Platform Committee of the Socialist platform has the courage to drive these words to their logical conclusion, and to publish that conclusion broadcast among the American farmers. For the logical conclusion is expressed in a single word, and that word is—confiscation. Or, if you prefer a softer expression and an additional word, the logical conclusion is land nationalization.

Let us consider how this would work out. Many of us remember the opening of that part of the old Indian Territory which then received the name of Oklahoma. We remember the gathering of the horde of squatters on the border, waiting for the opening day, and the wild rush for land, when that day came. The same kind of thing happened in 1908 in the far Northwest, when the Rosebud agency was opened. Think, then, what a rush we should have for the eight hundred millions of acres that make up our American farms, if that vast reservation were opened. That is the logical conclusion of the seven words so modestly inserted into the Socialist platform. One wonders how the American farmers would like that.

For, from one point of view, they would have no just reason to complain. A hundred and forty acres is a large holding for a single man, a single family; from the Western European point of view it is an immense area, almost a feudal estate.

But I can imagine my Socialist friends turning upon me and saying, "Who has ever suggested anything so ridiculous?" I do not believe any leading Socialist has the courage to suggest it and to carry his suggestion home to the American farmer. That would be the end of the Socialist propaganda, so far as the great producing class in this country is concerned.

But there are many steps toward Socialism, which are both dangerous and possible. A sentence in the new constitution of the Socialist party suggests some of these. That clause reads thus:

"Any member of the party who opposes political action or advocates crime, sabotage, or other methods of violence as a weapon of the working class to aid in its emancipation, shall be expelled from membership in the party."

On this, the draft constitution comments thus:

"The following alternative paragraph, initiated by seventy-five delegates, is submitted as a substitute for the section immediately preceding. 'Any member of the party who opposes political action shall be expelled from the party.'"

It is to be noted that the words: "advocates crime, sabotage, or other methods of violence," are the words omitted by this proposed amendment. Seventy-five delegates have, therefore, put themselves on record as at least condoning these.

Not less dangerous, and of kindred nature, are the "universal strikes" and "syndicalism" now so fashionable in the Socialistic thought and action of Europe; the great strikes which caused so much misery in France and are causing such misery in England.

The mention of England brings me inevitably to the plans of Mr. Lloyd George, which have already made such revolutionary progress there. It is not my purpose here to discuss whether these reforms do more good or harm. But I wish to point out, what is more to the purpose in the present discussion, that they are extremely costly. Note the impaired credit of England, as evidenced by the relentless fall of Consolidated Government Stock, the so-called Consols. Far above par before the South African War; now down in the seventies, and still falling. Note also the increasing difficulty of the struggle to keep up the battle-ship strength of the nation, in the face of Germany's naval programme. These are signs of the times, that all may read.

That socialistic plans like those of Mr. Lloyd George must of necessity be costly, in the long run ruinously costly, is almost a logical necessity. For look what they amount to, in principle: to give to the less effective the same reward as to the more effective; or, to speak in Darwinian terms, to suspend the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest.

An immense increase in cost, that is inevitable. And if this principle were made the basis of government, in other words, if the Socialist party were to win at the polls, and carry through their programme, it would mean an enormously costly government, with increasing burdens of taxation.

Now we come to the heart of the matter, so far as it concerns the American farmer. I doubt if the Socialist party

would dare to propose the logical outcome of their premises: confiscation and redistribution of the land. But they would dare, nay, they would be forced, to take the only possible alternative: the taxation of the American farmer, to pay the bill of their necessarily costly schemes.

Let me make this quite certain by quoting the whole clause, from which I have already taken the first seven words.

"The collective ownership of land wherever practicable, and in cases where such ownership is impracticable, the appropriation by taxation of the annual rental value of all land held for speculation or exploitation."

The meaning of the word "exploitation" is not quite clear. In one sense, farming a piece of land is exploiting it. But it is clear that the phrase is aimed at our old friend the "unearned increment." The unearned increment is to be made to bear the cost. The unearned increment is a "socially created" value, and so it should belong to the society which created it. Therefore let us take it in taxes and apply it to our costly Socialistic schemes.

At this point, the American farmer comes once more into the story. It will be remembered that, in 1900, the capital value of American farms amounted to twenty billion dollars. In 1910, this capital value amounted to forty-one billion dollars; had, in fact, more than doubled. To this enormous increase the farmer's industry and thrift contributed little. What he contributed may fairly be measured by the increased area of improved land, some three acres per farm. All the rest, twenty billion dollars, let us say, or, on the average, \$3,000 per farm, is unearned increment. Twenty billion dollars of unearned increment in ten years, or two billion dollars a year. Here is the field for Socialist taxation, when all industrial taxes are removed.

The Socialist Utopia will never prevail. It ought not to prevail, because Socialism springs from wrong motives, its view of life is false, its effect on human character and human development would be disastrous. Therefore it is wise to make clear the logical working out of Socialism, so that its dangers may be realized in advance, and guarded against; and with this purpose the present attempt is made to show how Socialism would work, if honestly applied, with regard to the largest class in the Republic, the class which produces the wealth and sustenance of the American nation.

CHARLES JOHNSTON.